OKPEBE SQUARE AND UMUOBODO IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF AMABOR OBODO ASAA AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY OF OWELLI, AWGU, ENUGU STATE.

as written by:

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1. The Historical Significance of Okpebe Square

Okpebe Square holds a central position in the cultural and spiritual life of Amabor Obodo Asaa Autonomous community of Owelli. It serves as the traditional meeting ground where all the 7 sons of Umuneja and umunoshi communities(Okpa,Ekwesu, Offiogwu,Ubulu,Uzam, Uhunanyi and Umuonwe)of the clan assemble for major communal rites, Chieftaincy titles ,festivals, settlement ground,and decision-making processes. Among its numerous functions, the most significant is its role as the sacred venue for the initiation and dedication of male children into communal life.

This traditional rite, known as “Idufu Okpebe,” is performed during the Oriri Anu Owelli Festival, a major cultural event that celebrates life, continuity, and ancestral protection. During the ceremony, all male children born within a span of one to three years are brought to Okpebe Square to be formally dedicated to Anu Owelli, the protective spirit and guardian deity of the land.

The ritual involves the presentation of traditional offerings such as a big ram, kolanuts, and other symbolic items, which are sacrificed in reverence to the ancestral spirits. The dedication signifies the child’s acceptance into the spiritual and communal fold of Amabor Obodo Asaa of Owelli, invoking divine protection, guidance, and sustenance as he grows.

Beyond its spiritual meaning, Okpebe Square serves as a physical and symbolic link between generations, representing the enduring bond between the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. The Idufu Okpebe ceremony formally marks the beginning of a boy’s communal journey, after which he is integrated into the Umuobodo institution—an age-grade system that instills discipline, hard work, and moral uprightness.

2. The Institution of Umuobodo

The Umuobodo is one of the most respected traditional institutions in Owelli society. It functions as a formative social structure through which young boys, recently initiated at Okpebe Square, are introduced to communal life, moral discipline, and vocational skills. The name “Umuobodo” literally translates to “Children of the Community,” emphasizing their role as emerging custodians of the land’s cultural values.

2.1 Duties and Discipline

The Umuobodo meet weekly, typically on Saturdays, in all the seven squares of Amabor Obodo Asaa to undertake their communal responsibilities. Their primary duty is the cleaning and sweeping of the various Square, symbolizing both physical cleanliness and spiritual purification. Through this regular gathering, the young members learn the value of communal service and cooperation.

The group also functions as a moral and disciplinary authority for all male children. Any report of misconduct or immoral behavior is brought before the Head of Umuobodo, who has the authority to mete out appropriate punishment. Depending on the gravity of the offense, penalties range from six to twenty-four strokes of the cane. This traditional justice system reinforces societal order and moral consciousness, ensuring that every young man grows up with a clear understanding of acceptable behavior.

2.2 Training in Skills and Self-Reliance

The Umuobodo system is also a platform for vocational and practical training. Every Saturday, each member is required to present a new basket or broom that he personally crafted during the week. This requirement is both a test of diligence and a lesson in craftsmanship, teaching the boys the importance of productivity and self-reliance. Failure to produce a handmade item results in corporal punishment, reinforcing accountability and responsibility from an early age.

2.3 Recognition and Rewards

As a vital segment of the community, Umuobodo members are recognized and rewarded during festivals and communal feasts. When livestock such as cows or goats are slaughtered for community events, specific portions—including the legs, intestines, and other parts of the meat—are traditionally reserved for the Umuobodo as their rightful share. This not only acknowledges their service but also strengthens their sense of belonging and pride within the community.

3. Umuobodo and the Hojoloku Festival

The Umuobodo also play a prominent cultural role during the Hojoloku Festival, an occasion marked by communal feasting, reconciliation, and the reaffirmation of kinship ties. During this festival, families prepare and share food, inviting relatives and friends from far and near.

A major highlight of the celebration is the appearance of the Umuobodo masquerade, known as “Mmanwu Oyi Ede.” The masquerade troupe, composed entirely of Umuobodo members, moves from house to house performing traditional songs and dances. Their famous chant is both a song of joy and a playful demand for generosity:

> Lead: “Onye anyi bialu be ya onokwee?”

Chorus: “Eeee onokwee!”

Lead: “Ihe odowelu ya wowete…eee onokwee…Oburu ego ya nweteee!”

Translation:

“Whose house have we come to? Is he around? If it is money he has, let him bring it forth!”

This musical interaction reflects the spirit of unity, merriment, and community sharing that defines the Hojoloku Festival.

On the final day of the festival, all Umuobodo masquerades from the different communities gather at Okpebe Square for a grand cultural display. Each group showcases its unique dance styles, including the Okoma dance and Gbuo Idemu (Ima Avu), in a friendly competition. Judges are appointed to assess performances, and awards are given to the best-performing group.

These performances not only entertain but also serve as a platform for transmitting traditional values, artistry, and pride in cultural heritage to younger generations.

4. Cultural Significance and Legacy

The intertwined traditions of Okpebe Square and Umuobodo embody the moral, social, and spiritual foundations of Amabor Obodo Asaa in Owelli. Together, they promote discipline, unity, service, and cultural continuity. Through the dedication at Okpebe and the moral training within the Umuobodo institution, every male child grows with a deep sense of identity, respect, and communal responsibility.

Even in the face of modernization, these practices remain vital reminders of the people’s heritage — a testament to their enduring respect for tradition, ancestry, and moral upbringing. The Okpebe Square continues to stand as both a physical space and a spiritual symbol of Amabor Obodo asaa of Owelli’s collective memory, ensuring that the values of the ancestors are preserved for generations yet unborn.

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In the other three communities of Owelli—Enugu, Umuhu, and Awono—similar practices are observed, though each community identifies the ceremony by a different name. Just as Amabor conducts its child dedication at Okpebe Square, Enugu Owelli performs a comparable rite at Nkwo Enugu, known locally as the Udu Festival. Awono celebrates the same event under the same name, while Umuhu refers to theirs as the Omo-Okolo Festival. Despite the variations in nomenclature, all these ceremonies share the same spiritual meaning and purpose, symbolizing dedication, protection, and communal identity. They are all celebrated within the same festive season of Oyiyi Anu Owelli,Awgu in Enugu, Nigeria

Disclaimer

The information presented in this documentation is not written from the standpoint of authority or custodianship, but rather as a reflection of personal observation/experience, oral accounts, and experiences gathered from members of the community. The descriptions, interpretations, and narratives are based on what I saw, heard, and was told by those familiar with the traditions.

This work is therefore intended solely for educational, cultural, and historical preservation purposes, and not as an official or definitive representation of the customs or beliefs of the Owelli people. Any variations or differences in interpretation across communities are acknowledged and respected.

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